

On a Mission

Fulfilling a promise to her ill father, angler Meredith McCord rips through the record books and becomes a fly-fishing icon.

WHEN MEREDITH MCCORD learned that her father and lifetime fishing partner, Frederick “Rick” McCord, had Stage IV kidney cancer, she went fishing. Fishing with a purpose, that is—she had vowed to compile 100 world records before her dad passed on. But her real story began some 35 years earlier, on Lake of the Woods in Ontario, Canada.

“I was the oldest of three siblings in Houston, and my family had a summer cabin up north,” McCord said. “We’d go every year. My dad and all his family had grown up hunting and fishing in Louisiana. It was always a big part of their lives, and my dad was taking us out fishing from an early age. When I was five, I was allowed to take a boat out with a five-

horsepower Johnson; by age ten, I had graduated to a ten horsepower. I remember very clearly my evening routine at the time. We’d have dinner, I’d take a bath, put on my nightgown and life vest, and then head out and fish for muskies, pike, bass, and walleyes.” At that time, McCord used a spinning rod.

By her teenage years, McCord’s summer trips to Canada were augmented with weekends in the countryside outside of Houston, fishing for bass on a small lake that her father, who’d been successful in the real estate business, built. It wasn’t until her family began spending time on Ambergris Caye in the early 1990s that fly fishing entered the picture.

“Before visiting Belize, I knew nothing of fly fishing,” McCord continued.

“We didn’t watch much television in our house and I knew nothing about Lefty Kreh or Flip Pallot and *The Walker’s Cay Chronicles*. We would go out after bonefish with George Bradley, but we’d use a spinning rod and shrimp. At that point, someone suggested that I should try fly fishing, as it was more challenging . . . and that I seemed to like a challenge. It was about this time that *A River Runs Through It* came out. Not only was the cinematography beautiful in the film, the fly casting and the brotherly competition appealed to me.”

After McCord graduated from Vanderbilt University and secured a job in Atlanta for the fall, she relocated to Jackson, Wyoming, for the summer, in large part to take up the art of fly fishing.



Though she was already a skilled and successful angler, the notion to pursue fishing records didn’t occur to McCord until someone casually mentioned the idea while she was bonefishing in the Bahamas. Soon after she landed her first record—a 32-pound redfish (bottom right).



At an early age, McCord fell in love with fishing, and at age 5, she started venturing solo onto the water, even while wearing pajamas. But she credits her father (right) for nurturing her passion for fly fishing and adventure.

A number of kind, seasoned anglers took her under their wings, and she had the chance to fish many of the region's great trout streams. Around this time, her father simultaneously began to take up fly fishing with his group of friends.

Fast-forward to 2005. Rick McCord was invited to join a group of friends to fish at Alphonse Island in the Seychelles with a group of 11 other anglers. Three months before the trip was scheduled to take place, one angler canceled. Knowing that his daughter was an eager and competent angler, McCord suggested that Meredith fill out the open spot. The response from the assembled anglers was a resounding "No! This is a guys' trip!" As the trip drew closer and the spot remained unspoken for, the group relented.

"Fishing in the Seychelles was my first hard-core fly fishing trip," McCord said. "That's when my passion for fly fishing really turned on."

McCord availed herself well enough to garner future invitations, and her skills continued to improve. In the fall of 2012, she was in the Bahamas, where an episode of *Buccaneers & Bones* was being filmed. She ended up hanging out with a member of the cast, actor Liam Neeson, and provided him with some casting tips and pinot noir drinking company. Before the week was out, one of the producers

approached her and asked if she'd ever thought of doing TV work. They also asked who she was—meaning, what was her claim to fame in the fly fishing world? Beyond being a passionate angler with the good fortune to be able to travel and fish, Meredith had no claim to fame.



"I wasn't a 'someone,'" she added. "Shortly afterwards, someone suggested that I could gain more legitimacy in the industry by getting an IGFA world record."

Record Keepers

The notion of formalizing documentation and recognition for the biggest species of fish caught—world records—is a conceit that dates back less than 80 years. As the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) website details:

Before 1939 there was no universal code of sporting ethics to guide ocean anglers in their pursuits. Some rules pertaining to sporting conduct were in effect at certain well-established fishing clubs but they varied according to the dictates of each club. The idea of a worldwide association of marine anglers had been brewing for some time in England, Australia, and the United States, and the first steps in this direction were taken in the late 1930's by members of the British Tunny Club who hoped to establish headquarters in England to formulate rules for ethical angling.

The IGFA came into being on June 7, 1939, and in its early days, the organization's focus was very much on large oceangoing species—Atlantic bluefin tuna, marlin, and other billfish. The group slowly added other saltwater targets, and much later, freshwater species. Different

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styles of fishing were also recognized as eligible for records, including fly fishing. Today, more than 100 freshwater species qualify for world records, and an even greater number of saltwater fish. Add to the number of species seven different tippet classes (ranging up to 20-pound test), and you have a veritable boatload of records available for the picking. Depending on your angling circle, some categories, say snook on 2-pound test, might carry a bit more weight than smallmouth buffalo on 16-pound test.

Some anglers of my acquaintance are not great proponents of record hunting. They see it as, at best, a form of angling-centric navel gazing. Some catch-and-release advocates (myself included) were raised to be biased against record seeking thanks to the impression that fish must be killed to qualify as records.

But that is actually not the case—a fish can be photographed, measured, weighed in a sling or a net on a certified scale (like a BogaGrip) on land, the ocean floor, or something bolted to the ocean floor (like an oil rig), and the information submitted for record consideration, without killing the fish.

Loss and Success

In December 2012, Meredith McCord landed her first record—a 32-pound-9-ounce redbfish on 16-pound tippet, thanks to Capt. Christian Yergens.

“I knew that the record could be



Since McCord made a vow to her father to conquer 100 fly fishing records, she's pursued countless saltwater and freshwater species (bottom left) all over the world, and received several awards (top left) and recognition for her success.

had out of Venice, Louisiana, as the big fish were there,” she recalled. “It took me eleven days of fishing to get the record. A few of the fly guides there would call me if they had a cancellation, and it's a cheap, quick flight from Houston. Several of them got a kick out of my quest.”

When McCord got home and reported that she'd landed a potential world record, her father was over-the-top excited.

“Everyone we'd come in contact with, he'd make sure he mentioned, ‘Do you know my daughter is a world-record holder?’ That Christmas, he gave me a

custom Sage ONE, 8-weight rod wrapped in red, white, and blue, with my name and record stats on it. And he said, ‘I want to be there and watch you land the next one.’” That opportunity came three months later in the Seychelles, an all-tackle-record island trevally and a bluefin trevally on 16-pound tippet.

After that holiday, McCord earned a few more records—which in turn earned her a spot on the cast of *Buccaneers & Bones*, season 4. The horizon was bright. But then came the bad news. Her dear father was diagnosed with cancer in July 2014.

“Dad, being an avid angler, and ever the optimist,” she said, “he kept saying, ‘This just a minor speed bump in the road, we'll be over it soon.’ For the first four months, the chemo seemed to be working. We continued to fish and even went hunting. But by December, the cancer came back with a vengeance. I continued going fishing for us, as my fish stories perked him up by allowing him to live vicariously through my adventures. Finally, in early 2015, I said ‘Dad, I'm going to get you one hundred world records.’ He was always a goal-oriented person, and he loved the idea of having something to work toward.”

The records fell quickly over the next year, thanks in part to a change in IGFA regulations that created a female category for all freshwater line classes. Some of McCord's records were notable—like the 43-pound black drum on 12-pound tippet. Others, like the run of smallmouth buffalo (a species she caught to fill each of the





seven tippet classes), a bit less so. On one memorable day, McCord earned 14 world records in six hours.

“After every trip, I’d take my iPad to my dad and share all my pictures and fishing stories. He couldn’t speak much, but he’d grab my hand and he’s say ‘Attagirl, keep at it.’ He loved hearing the stories and seeing the pictures.”

Of particular note is that over 60 of McCord’s records came from waters within a 2-hour drive of Houston, thanks to Capt. Kirk Kirkland. When McCord’s father passed away in October 2015, her tally rested at 78. She persevered in her quest, and on Father’s Day, 2016, she landed her 100th record on the lake her father built outside Houston—it was a largemouth bass caught on 16-pound tippet.

“Over the last several years, Lefty Kreh and I have become friends and pen pals,” McCord shared. “I love Lefty as he always tells it like it is. At The Fly Fishing Show

in Somerset, he took me aside and said, ‘Listen. I’m really proud of what you’ve done and are achieving, but we need to talk about all the crap you’re posting. This is not what the IGFA is about, and it’s not going to get you respect. I want you to go for real records. Enter fish that you’d be proud of and that others would be proud of.’ From that point forward, I have called them ‘Lefty Records,’ where the weight of the fish is more than or equal to the size of the line or tippet.”



“These days, I’m just having fun going for quality, not quantity.”

Chris Santella is the author of *Fifty Places to Fly Fish Before You Die*, *Why I Fly Fish*, *The Tug is the Drug*, and a number of other books. A regular contributor to *Trout*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, he lives in Portland, Oregon and frequently fished the Deschutes for steelhead.